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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

October 3, 2021

Text: Matthew 22:34–46

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Last semester, I took a class in political theory and government. It wasn't a class dedicated exclusively to American government or modern democracies. Rather, it was a survey of various political theories and governmental forms practiced over the 2,500 years of western history. One of the more memorable moments in the class occurred when it was pointed out that the emphasis on rights, both legal and natural, is relatively new. This new emphasis really grew out of the rise of modern nation states with changing forms of governments. But it particularly found expression in the 1700's. The most famous expression of this is found in our Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson who, in turn, borrowed his ideas from John Locke and other thinkers of their time:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men...

I know that we are in church, not civics class. So please bear with me as I attempt to establish how and why we 21st century American think and act. It will become important to both the Old Testament and Gospel readings appointed for today. But notice two things about our Declaration here. First, we hold that it is self-evidently true that God Himself has given us unalienable rights, namely, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. God has given people, all people, certain rights. Second, that the purpose of government is to secure these God-given, unalienable rights. Secure, meaning, to keep them safe. Government doesn't grant them, God does. The purpose of government is to keep them safe from anyone who would take them away from us.

This brief review of our history may provide some clarity as to why there is so much debate taking place in our country. Everyone, on both sides of our cultural debates – Covid, abortion, marriage, immigration, etc. – are claiming rights. Rights to get married, to have abortions, to wear masks or not wear masks, to privacy, to bear arms,

to vote with or without identification, and so forth. While the idea of rights was not foreign to the ancient, classical, and medieval worlds, it wasn't their primary way of thinking; they focused more upon obligations to one's family, society, and religion. For us moderns, especially living in capitalistic democracies, rights, both legal and natural are a primary way of thinking about life and society.

God's Word, however, calls for God's people to think about the world differently. Consequently, we live differently. Don't mistaken what I'm saying here. I am not saying that our present emphasis on rights is unbiblical or unchristian. Nor am I saying that living according to established norms of obligations is contrary to the Bible. That's not my point. God's Word has always called God's people to live differently and to think differently about the world. In that sense, the Bible has always been counter cultural.

So what is the Biblical teaching that guides Christians in their day to day lives, even more than rights and obligations? It's quite simple and revolutionary: love. Consider the Deuteronomy 10:12, "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul..." More than life, land, country, family, or anything or anyone, we love the Lord God with all our heart and mind. Quite simply, we love God as our highest and greatest treasure.

The Bible defines love as giving yourself completely and sacrificially for the good of someone else. Love includes rights and obligations but transcends them. When asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." In other words, loving God is the orientation of our heart, soul, and mind toward Him. Everything about us is to be directed toward God in love. Our heart, that is, our emotions and feelings, that which we long for and desire. Our soul, that is, our spiritual being, that which makes us different from everyone else. Our mind, that is, with our intellect and everything that our intellect controls such as decisions, actions of the body, and even our emotions to a large extent. You, dear saints of God, are to love God with your body and soul, mind and emotions, with your entire person, body and soul.

Loving God means loving and desiring God above all others, including your spouse, children, family, money, security, etc. His name, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit revealed to us through the Lord Jesus, is to be your highest and most sacred treasure.

And His Word – Holy Scripture – is to be your very life-bread for man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word of God. This, in summary, is loving God according to His commandments.

But that is only one side of the coin. God's Word calls us to love our neighbor, our fellow man. Jesus describes this kind of love as like unto the love we have for God. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus says, "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The Lord Jesus is simply quoting Leviticus 19:18. Today's Old Testament reading describes loving a specific kind of neighbor as ourselves: the sojourner, which is anyone from another nation living temporarily or even permanently in a foreign country. Deuteronomy 10:12, "Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." According to Holy Scripture, we see the people around us not primarily as possessors of certain rights nor as claimants of certain obligations that must be fulfilled either by us or someone else – though these things are included. Rather, we see them, first and foremost, as unique creations of God with indescribable dignity and worth. Our neighbors need our love, that is, they need our heart and mind to be set upon providing for their good in whatever ways that are right and proper, even if that requires giving sacrificially from our time, resources, our very own lives.

The Bible very clearly teaches that people do have certain rights. Several of the commandments wouldn't make any sense if they didn't. For example, people have a right to keep their possessions and private property. The seventh Commandment, "You shall not steal." And the ninth Commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house." People have a right to life. The fifth Commandment, "You shall not murder." People have a natural right to live under legitimate authority. The fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother." That commandment also teaches children have a right to their parents and vice versa. And people have a right to worship the one true God of heaven and earth. The first three commandments: You shall have no other gods. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. You Remember the sabbath by keeping it holy.

God's Word also teaches that people are obligated to perform certain tasks. Using the 10 commandments, we see that people are obligated to worship God in the way He chooses. We are obligated to care for our parents and honor other authorities. We are obligated to honor and respect our neighbors as persons, physical and spiritual. We must protect his life, his family, wife and children, as well as his possessions and property, his name and reputation, and all that he has.

But here is the difference with us Christians. We Christians recognize our neighbors' rights and we exercise our rights in the larger world. We Christians gladly keep our obligations and we, in turn, expect in hope that others will keep their obligations toward us. For Christians, however, the foundational reason we do these things is love. Love for God above all things. And love for our neighbor as ourselves.

And we must remember that the love we are talking about here is defined by the Bible, not the world, not human passions and lusts. I Corinthians 13 gives a beautiful and helpful description of the love of God and love for neighbor we seek to have and share:

⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way (*i.e., rights*); it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (*i.e., obligations*). ⁸Love never ends... ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (4–8a, 13).

The Lord Jesus summarized the entire Biblical witness as being fulfilled in this kind of love. “On these two commandments (*i.e., love for God and love for man*) depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:40). Ultimately, the reason we Christians find love to be our primary motivation, above rights and obligations, is that love is grounded in God Himself. God is love. He doesn't simply have love. He is love. So writes the apostle John twice in his first epistle. I John 4:8, 16.

And His patient, kind, determined not to be arrogant, rude, irritable or resentful, but enduring, hoping, and rejoicing kind of love is most powerfully and beautifully seen in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God in human flesh. Jesus didn't die on the cross for your salvation or the salvation of the world because of rights and obligations. He did so out of love, love for His Father who sent Him and love for us poor sinners who need Him above all things.

There are so many bewildering questions and problems plaguing our world. I need not rehearse them. You know them. And on top of all that, we face our own more local and private struggles of body and soul. Rights and obligations must be honored and kept. But in the end, love is the only enduring answer. Rest in God's love. Abide in the love of God that surpasses all human understanding and overcomes all trials and temptations. Let me conclude with a portion from I John 4:

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another...

¹⁶So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear... ¹⁹We love because he first loved us.... ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.